OPINION

BY MUNA KHAN

Calm vs chaos

I BELIEVE I manifested this getaway to Islamabad.

For the past three months, life in Karachi has been so frustrating that I have been saying out loud that I want to get out of here. It is difficult to take the state of the roads, people's driving or the complete absence of any road etiquette, besides my own increasing road rage, any longer. And then of course, there is the mess that DHA has turned into. One does not even need to get into the daily life struggles that we all face.

I did not realise that by saying 'I need a break', someone would actually grant me one. So here I am, a suitcase filled with everything warm that I own, as well as things loaned by friends and family.

This is not my first time in the capital but it is my first time on my own. You see cities through a different lens when you're a solo traveller. Previously, when planning this visit, everyone had an opinion about my neighbourhood, choice of commute, where to eat, etc, and a lot of it was based on their own experience, but there was also a lot of hearsay parading as fact. One had heard that the food in Islamabad was terrible. It is not. One heard the city was very clean. It is not.

A newcomer might come expecting a utopia and while anything is better than the many DHA Khayabans currently trying to pass off as roads in Karachi, the capital is not without its faults. This isn't going to turn into an 'us vs them' debate. But it does make one think a lot about perception vs reality.

In the last six weeks or so, during Decemberistan, I met a lot of people in Karachi who visited Lahore. If you haven't heard the word, Decemberistan, according to actor Adnan Malik, who coined the term almost a decade ago, denotes the time of year "when a false sense of mass euphoria and well-being affects the population of urban Pakistan". Both overseas Pakistanis and friends who had to go to Lahore for weddings told us how well Lahore 'worked' as a city. These aren't the expatriates who bemoan everything that is wrong with Pakistan. They are, admittedly wealthy, Pakistanis who tilt towards one party — they hate this Form 47 government — so to hear them begrudgingly praise Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz's administration was a surprise in itself.

We've seen the ads about the projects launched by Maryam Nawaz's administration and it all seems impressive, but how does that translate into real impact? Who is benefiting? I ask because outside this extended circle of mine is the other side that posts pictures of dirty roads, false advertising and what not.

Take the claim Maryam Nawaz made last month at a *jalsa* that crime was down by 80 per cent in the province. "Punjab is now a safe place," she told the crowds. It echoed what my female friends said about feeling safer in the province and what uncles said about not hearing so much about crime in neighbourhoods. In other words, it *sounded* right. But a fact-check by a legacy news outlet found that based on the statistics from Punjab Police, crime was only down by 2pc. The most reduction reported was in cases of gang rape, which were down by 44pc from 2024. Yet Maryam Nawaz's claims resonated with people on both sides of the divide. The roads are better, cleaner, they're planning Basant, hurrah. Who cares about facts?

At the time of writing, no one had fact-checked Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's presentation on Sindh's progress under his party's rule. He did this to negate the naysayers who like to portray Sindh as "a glass half empty" province, he was quoted as saying. He spoke about his party's performance in healthcare, education, poverty alleviation, infrastructure, industry, agriculture and revenue generation. It was all very impressive but I was struggling to believe it, having witnessed only a bleak picture.

> The gap between perception and reality in media has widened.

Then there's Imran Khan. We've not seen or heard from him; he's not allowed to meet anyone. Yet entire campaigns are run under his name. And they damage his case and create fissures within the party. I'm convinced his social media team doesn't want him out.

Who do we believe?

The gap between perception and reality in mainstream media has widened so much that I don't know if it can be fixed. Maybe it needs a complete overhaul. It begins with rebuilding trust and that can only happen once we accept that we were deployed to manufacture consent and build narratives — for *seths* or someone else. We must promise not to do that again. It sounds as naive as the idea that I will not miss Karachi's chaos. But we simply can't afford to live in our own versions of reality far removed from the most glaring one — facts cannot be altered for your comfort. ■

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BY AIZAZ AHMAD CHAUDHRY

Fading footprint

WITH two vast oceans giving it a sense of security against foreign aggressors, the US could understandably be lulled into believing itself to be inviolable. When the Japanese carried out a surprise attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941, the US woke up, fought back, and emerged as one of the victors of World War II. The next challenge to US supremacy came from the Cold War with the Soviet Union, ending in the dissolution of the latter in 1991. Feeling ultra-secure and confident, the US, now the sole superpower, embarked on extending its outreach to every corner of the globe. Some American analysts started projecting liberal democracy and market economies as the only universal organising principle of governance for all countries.

As the new century dawned, two developments shattered this sense of supremacy. First, Al Qaeda attacked America's iconic buildings in New York and Washington on Sept 11, 2001. Second, China emerged as a global economic powerhouse and a potential military challenge. While 9/11 led America into distant and never-ending wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, China continued its peaceful rise. A multipolar and interconnected world began to shape up. America decided to contain the further rise of China. In 2017, the US National Security Strategy resolved to advance US influence globally and counter rising powers like China and Russia. This was reinforced by the Biden administration's NSS-2022, which focused on out-competing China, constraining Russia, defending democracies and human rights, and building coalitions with like-minded powers.

However, the policy to out-compete China didn't work. Even the attempt to bog down Russia in Ukraine didn't really go the way the US and Europe had envisaged. At home, US overstretch became costly — debt burden, high unemployment and a deteriorating road infrastructure. America began to review its approach to national security, leading to Trump's NSS-2025, which stipulated that the US would no longer act as the guarantor of the world order it had helped create eight decades ago. The top priority for it now is the Western Hemisphere, a kind of reassertion of the Monroe Doctrine (1823) as manifested by the recent US attack on Venezuela, which was another blow to the rules-based order. On global issues, the US opted to engage more selectively (securing Greenland; continued support to Israel; military and economic coercion of Iran; preventing China from achieving unification with Taiwan). The US has also decided to deal with China through trade and tariffs, securing supply chains and next-generation missile defence systems.

Internally, President Donald Trump continues with his America First approach, seeking to boost the domestic industrial base, enhance border security, restrict migration, prevent erosion of traditional American values and prioritise emerging technologies for a competitive edge.

What does America's shrinking footprint on the global stage augur for different regions? For Europe, there is no choice but to decrease its reliance on the transatlantic alliance to secure the continent, spend more on its own regional defence and resolve issues created by liberal migration policies, which the NSS warns could lead to "civilisational erasure". With shrinking US support, Ukraine is facing defeat at the hands of Russia.

East Asian and Pacific countries are struggling to strike a balance in their ties with China and the US. After the recent retrenchment of America's global footprint, China is being viewed as the leading global power in Asia, albeit with challenges from Japan and India.

> What will a reduced global role for the US mean?

As for South Asia, following the May 2025 conflict with Pakistan, India has discovered that its strategic partnership with the US has come under severe strain. While NSS-2017 had predicated America's Asia pivot on a strategic partnership with India, NSS-2025 mentions India only in terms of its commercial relevance to the US and contribution to Indo-Pacific security. India's purchase of Russian oil has also upset the US and Europe. With Russia, India has maintained its traditionally strong ties, though President Vladimir Putin's recent visit to India produced no notable outcome. Border tensions mar its ties with China. India is struggling to strike the right balance in its relations with all major powers, while managing its troubled ties with Pakistan, Bangladesh and other South Asian countries.

Pakistan-US ties are witnessing a reset after a decade-long stalemate, with possible openings for US investment in Pakistan. In NSS-2017, Pakistan was mentioned in the context of transnational terrorism or nuclear security; NSS-2025 does not mention Pakistan. We can debate the impact of America's changing worldview on various global hotspots and China's evolving role later. ■

The writer is former foreign secretary of Pakistan and chairman Sanober Institute.

FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1976 | Fifty years ago

Food autarky potential

ISLAMABAD: US Congressman Charles Diggs, who is on a short visit to Pakistan, told a Press conference here today [Jan 17] that Pakistan's food problem was of considerable concern to the US, which was the chief food exporter in the world. Congressman Diggs … said his tour was in connection with the continued concern of the [US] about the American foreign assistance programme as it related to the food deficit areas… . …He said after his talks here and after seeing in person some of the exciting progress being made in the field of agriculture in Pakistan, he believed that Pakistan had the potential to realise self-sufficiency in food and then divert its attention to other fields of development. — Islamabad Bureau

[Meanwhile, as reported by news agencies from Islamabad,] Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto said here today [Jan 17] that the late Tun Abdur Razzak was a "great freedom fighter". The Prime Minister drove this afternoon to Islamabad to condole with the Malaysian Ambassador, Mr. Kamaruddin Mohammad Ariff, on the sad demise of Tun Abdur Razzak who expired in London on Wednesday [Jan 14]. Mr. Bhutto said late Prime Minister Razzak … "worked for the independence of Malaysia".

1951 | Seventy-five years ago

Ayub is now army chief

RAWALPINDI: Lieutenant-General Ayub Khan took over today [Jan 17] the appointment of Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Army, says a Press release issued here today by the Inter-Services Public Relations Department, Ministry of Defence. General Sir Douglas Gracey, who left this morning for Swat, was given a ceremonial farewell by the troops of the Pakistan Army.

The troops lined the five-mile route from the C-in-C's House to the end of the cantonment. As General Gracey's car passed them they presented arms to the departing Commander-in-Chief. General Ayub Khan and Major-General M. Hayauddin escorted the C-in-C to the end of the cantonment.

Earlier, senior officers of the Pakistan Army and their wives assembled at the C-in-C's House to bid farewell to General Gracey. Among those present were Lt-Gen Ayub Khan, Lt-Gen McCay, Commissioner of Rawalpindi, and Mr Mohammad Ayyub, Joint Secretary. Ministry of Kashmir Affairs. The GHQ Signal Regiment also presented a Guard of Honour to General Gracey, who is Colonel Commandant of the Royal Pakistan Signals. — News agencies

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.

Iran crisis through the lens of history

A LOT of videos are circulating on social media platforms related to the recent happenings in Iran. One such video showed a woman protester who, after getting hit by a shell fired by the security forces, could be seen screaming, "I am not afraid. I am dead for 47 years". It needs to be seen, why Iranians have suddenly turned against their government. In fact, history shows us that people living under a theocracy tend to react violently after a period of time. Why? The answer to this lies in understanding the context of the phenomenon.

Iran is definitely not alone in this. When religion — any religion — is used as a tool to extend one's hold on power for a long time, people react. The medieval Europe went through the heat of it. When it started to choke under the dictates, indulgences and decrees of the priests, it finally broke the very walls which created the illusion of its protection. Progress in the field of science led to several inventions that facilitated change; the most important in this context being the printing press. The internet, today, is what the printing press was to medieval Europe; a tool to spread knowledge and information at an unprecedented pace.

The newer generations could see the free world and personal choice in terms of religious and social freedoms. Saudi Arabia opened the valve to release some of the steam, resulting in a populist sort of country, though still a kingdom. In contrast, the Iranian theocracy, run by hardline clerics, underestimated the power of fast-paced information exchange. People want social freedoms; they want to live a life of their own choice, not one dictated by some central authority.

Adding to the pressure was the last year's war between Iran and Israel that shattered the veneer of invincibility that was for long promoted by the ruling clerics. The mention of war is a controversial subject on its own, but it is mentioned just to point to the latest catalyst behind the unrest.

It is getting firmly established now that running societies and wielding power by hiding behind the facade of religion is going to get harder in Muslim societies. Things are changing, and they are, indeed, changing faster than anyone anticipated. Iran is witnessing it today even if the basic trigger happens to be a struggling economy.

Bahadar Ali Khan
Toronto, Canada

Whim and fancy

THIS is with reference to the article 'From patriots to traitors' (Dec 10), which argued that the army should step back and focus on actual terrorism instead of labelling the incarcerated former prime minister a 'security threat'. I completely agree that the army is an institution, and its focus should be on combating the menace of terrorism.

However, the core problem Pakistan faces today is not merely military interference in politics. The real crisis is a profound institutional dysfunction that has plagued the country for long.

As such, politicians are frequently more interested in their relationship with the army than in improving governance; the army remains engaged in political affairs, and the judiciary is often perceived as ineffective.

With key state apparatuses faltering, our political discourse is reduced to a binary: politicians are either cooperating with or fighting against the establishment. Therefore, asking the army to unilaterally step back is an oversimplification.

The solution requires correcting every part of the system. We must demand that politicians focus solely on politics and policymaking, and that the judiciary exercises its authority independently.

We would earn the right to expect the military to confine itself to its primary national security duties when each state component grows and performs its constitutional role effectively. Merely asking the army and the political opposition to cease bilateral criticism will not change the systemic rot.

Every actor, be it politicians, judges or the military, must be held to the principle of working strictly within their mandated domains. This is how you transform the army from a parallel governing authority into a purely professional institution.

You cannot reform the army in isolation; you must reform the entire state structure. That should be the core point of discussion.

Omama Safdar
Kot Chajji

Technology at airports

I RECENTLY arrived at the airport in Karachi and was surprised by the long, slow-moving immigration lines and the dated process. After hours of travel, passengers were made to wait simply to answer one basic question: which flight did you take coming here?

The contrast with Dubai could not be sharper. At departure from Dubai, I passed through an automated eye scanner in seconds. On arrival there earlier, I simply scanned my passport at a smart gate and walked through. There were no queues, no repetitive questioning, and no unnecessary delays. The technology exists. It works.

Pakistan is not new to technology-driven governance. We already use systems based on artificial intelligence (AI) for automatic traffic challans, vehicle recognition and surveillance. If we can identify a speeding car or a signal violation automatically, why can we not identify a traveller through biometric verification at immigration?

Airports are a nation's front door. Long queues, manual stamping and redundant questions project inefficiency and poor planning. They waste time, exhaust travellers, overburden staff, and create opportunities for human error. Smart immigration gates using passport chips, facial recognition and biometric databases that dramatically reduce waiting times.

Dr Irfan Habib
Karachi

Muridke buses

AS cities across Punjab embrace modern, eco-friendly transportation, Muridke remains stuck in the slow lane. While the Green Bus initiative has transformed public transport in many cities, Muridke's residents are left at the mercy of inadequate and outdated options.

The Green Transport Vision 2025 of Punjab government has rolled out sleek, zero-emission buses, offering affordable fares, GPS tracking, and modern amenities. Cities like Sargodha, Sheikhupura and Sialkot have benefited from this initiative, but Muridke is yet to see any significant improvement.

In Lahore, commuters can hop on a Green Bus with Wi-Fi and pay a flat rate of Rs20. In Muridke, people either rely on poorly maintained vehicles, or expensive private rides.

The recent initiative is part of Punjab's broader effort to modernise public transportation. With plans to expand the service to smaller towns, there is still hope that Muridke might eventually benefit. Until then, the city's residents are left to rely on the outdated transport system.

Ahsan Ali
Muridkey

▶ **GARBAGE TRUCKS:** I witnessed a troubling sight on a chilly winter morning while driving to work recently. Ahead of my car was a garbage truck carrying waste that was not properly covered. As it moved through the bumpy roads of Karachi, the garbage kept slipping out, polluting large parts of the town. Garbage-collection vehicles are meant to keep cities clean, not contribute further to environmental degradation. It is imperative that these trucks be properly designed, and strictly required to use secure covers while transporting waste. In essence, this simple measure can significantly reduce litter, improve hygiene, and make our surroundings cleaner and safer for everyone.
Saba Shaikh
Karachi

▶ **DUST, GARBAGE AND SMOKE:** The Golra Mor area in Islamabad has become a hub of dirt, dust, garbage and unhygienic conditions. Due to poor road maintenance, heavy traffic, and constant movement of vehicles, air pollution in the area is severe. The situation is further worsened by excessive smoking by people and vehicle emissions that make the environment unhealthy for pedestrians, commuters and area residents. Garbage is scattered everywhere, creating an unpleasant sight and posing health risks. Proper road repairs, regular cleaning, strict control on smoking and emissions, and effective traffic management are urgently required to improve the situation.
Ehtisham Ijaz
Islamabad

▶ **GOOD TEACHERS:** A good teacher develops moral sensitivity in students, which artificial intelligence (AI) can never do. Discussions and reflections enable the teachers to lead the class by example. However, AI continues to change the educational landscape, and our teachers must be adequately trained and supported by their institutions to be able to navigate effectively in this new environment. Providing teachers with support and resources is an educational priority to help students engage in ethical learning and responsible citizenship.
Aysha Khan
Karachi

Self-help can often do the trick

RECENTLY, I visited a peripheral area of Rawalpindi. It was a locality of the poor, and right in front of the settlement there was an open ground with litter flying all around and a stream of sewage running around and across it. It was hard to believe that people could actually live in such a surrounding, but they do. They breathe, they play, they earn while living there. They are there not by choice, but because of their circumstances. We enjoy the many privileges that we do without even realising how blessed we actually are and how grateful we should be.

Another thought that crossed my mind during the visit related to our social behaviour. The locality was inhabited by various families. If each family had taken out just an hour to clean their unsightly surroundings, the open ground might have presented a completely different look. Maybe they did not feel that it was awkward living in such an environment, or maybe they, like many of us, believed that keeping public spaces clean is the sole responsibility of the local administration. Their children play amid all that mess. It will rain. It will stink. But they will never join hands to improve their locality.

There are times when bringing a positive change requires just a bit of effort, but we generally do not bother putting it in either because of over-reliance on some 'external help' or because we do not want things to change for the better. In either case, it is we, the people, who end up being the losers.

Muhammad Majid Shafi
Islamabad

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is *Dawn's* External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of *Dawn's* code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
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